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Consumer Affairs Agency (CAA) Reviews Product Expiration Labeling Policy

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FAIRS Subject Report

Approved By:

Stephen Wixom

Prepared By:

Yuichi Hayashi

Report Highlights:

A major Japanese newspaper, the Yomiuri Shimbun, reported in November 2010, that the Consumer Affairs Agency (CAA) will review policy for the expiration date labeling requirements of processed foods. The CAA hopes to reduce the volume of foods disposed of prematurely by the food industry in order to emphasize the freshness of their products. The CAA hopes to review the current guidelines for best before dates by March 2011 and will ask food manufacturers for their cooperation in extending the use of their products.

General Information:

The Yomiuri Shimbun, the largest newspaper in Japan in terms of a daily circulation (10.03 million for the morning edition average for October 2010), reported in the November 2, 2010, evening edition that the Consumer Affairs Agency (CAA) has decided to review the guidelines governing the “best before” date labeling of processed foods. However, the CAA has not yet reached a final decision on the details of the guidelines. The article was written following an opinion exchange meeting held by the CAA with the food industry in September; notes of which can be found on the CAA website.

Under current Japanese law there are two types of date marking for processed foods products in Japan. The first type of date marking requires a “use by date”, and is intended for foods that are deemed to have a relatively short shelf life (five days or shorter) including foods found at delicatessens, boxed lunches, sandwiches and other pre-prepared foods. The date is labeled on the package in a year-month-date format and some manufactures choose to also indicate a time the food should be used by and under which kind of conditions the date marking is applicable. This kind of date marking implies that the product should not be eaten after the date indicated on the label.

In contrast, “best before” date marking is applied to products with a long shelf-life such as processed foods including frozen foods and snacks. Of course, both best before and use by date marking systems are only good prior to opening the package. Once the package is opened the CAA recommends that the consumer eats the food as soon as possible. The best before date indicates the date or month the initial quality of the product can be expected to be maintained if stored under the conditions specified on the package. The year-month-date format is used for durations of three months or less and if the expected duration is longer than three months, the product must bear a best before date in the year-month format. The implication of this kind of date marking is that even if the product date marking expires, the food can be expected to remain edible. The CAA is considering but has not reached a conclusion on whether they will require the phrase indicating that the product remains edible even beyond the “before date”.

According to date marking guidelines developed by the government of Japan (GOJ) in 2005, processed food manufacturers are responsible for determining best before dates through various physical and chemical tests, microbial tests, and organoleptic tests based on a formula for determining that the product remains reasonably safe. Under currently labeling policy, GOJ allows various food industry groups to formulate the date mark based on their own methods. Please see the following link for more information: [Guidelines for date marking \(Japanese\)](#)

The purpose of a revision to the current guidelines is to reduce the amount of food disposed by retailers and manufacturers. According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), this type of disposal amounts to 5 to 9 million metric tons annually. This business practice, resulting in large volumes of prematurely disposed food, calls for retailers to return products with best before dates that have reached as little as one third of the way between the production date and best before date. Yomiuri Shimbun has reported that the CAA will add a requirement for the phrase “edible even after best the before date” to be indicated on the product.

